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U. S. Department of AgricultureThe Little Things in Cookery

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A radio dialogue between Miss Ruth Van Deman, Bureau of Home Economics, and Mr. Wallace Kadderly, Office of Information, broadcast Thursday, February 10, 1938, in the Department of Agriculture period, National Farm and Home Hour, by the National Broadcasting Company and a network of 93 associated radio stations.

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MR. KADDERLY: And now for another report on home economics matters, here's our friend, Ruth Van Deman. Well Ruth, perhaps you'd better sound your own keynote.

MISS VAN DEMAN: Well I'm keynoting, if you chose to call it so, on the little things in cookery. Very important to the general welfare.

MR. KADDERLY: General welfare? Isn't that claiming a good deal for cooking?

MISS VAN DEMAN: Not too much I think. Read this.

MR. KADDERLY: What is this?

MISS VAN DEMAN: Just a bit of philosophy from a cookbook by Mrs. Joseph Conrad, published a long, long time ago. Her famous husband, Joseph Conrad, wrote this ---

MR. KADDERLY: I thought he was the man who wrote those powerful tales about the sea.

MISS VAN DEMAN: He was. But apparently he liked good home cooking in his non-literary moments.

MR. KADDERLY: Well, let's see what Joseph Conrad has to say:

"Good cooking is a moral agent. By good cooking I mean the conscientious preparation of the simple food of everyday life, but not the more or less skillful concoction of idle feasts and rare dishes. ---

MISS VAN DEMAN: Party meals.

MR. KADDERLY: "Conscientious cooking, by rendering easy the processes of digestion, promotes the serenity of mind, the graciousness of thought, and that indulgent view of our neighbor's failings which is the only genuine form of optimism."

MISS VAN DEMAN: Wouldn't you call that general welfare?

MR. KADDERLY: And the pursuit of happiness ... yes, Ruth, I guess you're right.

(over)

MISS VAN DEMAN: Well, coming down to cases.

MR. KADDERLY: How to keep the juice in a good thick steak.

MISS VAN DEMAN: You would pop that at me first thing, Wallace.

MR. KADDERLY: Certainly. With the price of beef moderating and more beef coming to market --

MISS VAN DEMAN: A man's fancy just naturally turns toward broiled steak.

MR. KADDERLY: Well, isn't that a fair question in technique?

MISS VAN DEMAN: Perfectly. And I'll try to give it a fair answer. Well, to keep a steak juicy, the main thing is to broil at moderate temperature for the greater part of the time it's under the flame or in the skillet. Of course you need enough heat to brown it when you first put it in. But too much heat all the time drives the juice out of meat.

MR. KADDERLY: Then you don't believe in O. Henry's rule.

MISS VAN DEMAN: What's that?

MR. KADDERLY: "Place the steak in your pocket and walk slowly through a red-hot kitchen."

MISS VAN DEMAN: Not unless you're a cave man. And want your steak burned to a crisp on the outside and raw inside.

MR. KADDERLY: No. I want it rare, not raw.

MISS VAN DEMAN: Evenly rare, all the way through.

MR. KADDERLY: Um-hum.

MISS VAN DEMAN: The moderate temperature does that to perfection, once you've browned the outside for flavor. I'm very glad you didn't say you wanted your steak well done.

MR. KADDERLY: That ruins it for me.

MISS VAN DEMAN: It ruins the juice. No steak can be well done and really be juicy. Or roast meat either. By the time you've cooked meat to the well done stage, you've cooked the juice in, or out, or off, anyway it's gone.

MR. KADDERLY: With the wind.

MISS VAN DEMAN: Of course, it takes a little longer to cook meat at moderate temperature, but it certainly does give a fine, juicy, evenly cooked product. That answer you, Wallace?

MR. KADDERLY: Not entirely. You didn't say how long to broil a steak.

MISS VAN DEMAN: Sorry but I can't. Too much depends on the thickness of the steak and the temperature of the broiler, and you can't measure that exactly. Science can help you only so far in the broiling business.

MR. KADDERLY: The rest you have to learn from experience.

MISS VAN DEMAN: There's one little point about making gravy though that even some experienced cooks never seem to learn.

MR. KADDERLY: How to season it?

MISS VAN DEMAN: No. How to keep lumps out.

MR. KADDERLY: What's the trick?

MISS VAN DEMAN: Stirring the flour into the fat first until they're blended smooth. Then adding the liquid cold, not hot --

MR. KADDERLY: Cold liquid.

MISS VAN DEMAN: If you pour a quantity of hot liquid in all at once, it cooks the starch granules in the flour too rapidly. And the gravy's full of lumps before you can say Jack Robinson. With the cold liquid, you have time to stir it all through before the mixture begins to boil and thicken. And you come out with a smooth gravy, no lumps.

MR. KADDERLY: I'll try to remember that next time I'm camp cook.

MISS VAN DEMAN: And maybe you'd like to know about cornstarch in lemon pie.

MR. KADDERLY: Lemon pie! Ruth! --- "Concoction of idle feasts and rare dishes".

MISS VAN DEMAN: There's a nice little point in starch cookery involved.

MR. KADDERLY: Well of course you understand I'm not averse to eating good lemon pie.

MISS VAN DEMAN: So I've noticed. But sometimes the filling in lemon pie loses its stiffness and gets runny after it stands a while.

MR. KADDERLY: Butterscotch pie does that too.

MISS VAN DEMAN: Same principle. It's the effect of the acid in the lemon and in the brown sugar on the starch. The same thing happens sometimes with chocolate pie. The acid dextrinizes the starch and makes it lose its thickening power. Then the longer you cook the acid and the starch together, the thinner the mixture gets.

MR. KADDERLY: How do you get around this action of the acid on the starch?

MISS VAN DEMAN: Well, with lemon we cook the cornstarch and sugar and water together first. Then add the eggs, and last of all the lemon juice and grated rind. And we bake the pie shell by itself before the filling goes in, and then put the whole pie in a moderate oven just long enough to brown the meringue. That way the lemon filling isn't overcooked and the acid doesn't have a chance to act too long on the starch.

MR. KADDERLY: And you have a crusty pie crust, not pie dough.

MISS VAN DEMAN: That's so too! With the chocolate filling, when the chocolate goes in at the start with the milk, flour seems to be a better thickener to use than cornstarch. I was talking to the manager of a big cafeteria the other day, famous for its pies and cakes. That morning they were making 50 chocolate pies. They said they've never had a single one ooze over the plate when it was cut. They always use flour as the binder. And they make it a point not to overcook the filling, though they're careful to cook it long enough to get rid of the raw "starchy" taste. -- Well those are just a few of the little things about handling starch in cooking.

MR. KADDERLY: "To render easy the process of digestion."

MISS VAN DEMAN: And "promote serenity of mind." Well, another starchy subject -- rice.

MR. KADDERLY: Plenty of it on hand this year -- the largest crop on record.

MISS VAN DEMAN: No excuse then if Americans aren't good rice cooks. In some parts of the world you know they judge a woman's skill as a cook by the way she prepares rice.

MR. KADDERLY: Separate grains, I hope.

MISS VAN DEMAN: Yes. If she's a topnotcher each grain keeps its shape.

MR. KADDERLY: Is there more than one way of doing that?

MISS VAN DEMAN: Yes, several. The one I find most successful is to cook the rice in eight times as much water as rice. -- that is two quarts of water for each cup of dry rice. Sprinkle the rice into the boiling water and leave the cover off the pan. Run a fork through it now and then to keep it from sticking to the bottom of the pan, but don't stir it with a spoon.

MR. KADDERLY: Like the gravy.

MISS VAN DEMAN: No, this time you want to let the starch granules stay together in each grain of the rice.

MR. KADDERLY: Well, Ruth, you certainly have covered a lot of territory today. And given cause for a very "genuine form of optimism", with all this information about better "preparation of the simple food of every day life". I'm in complete agreement with Joseph Conrad on that. Now, Ruth, one more question before you go.

MISS VAN DEMAN: All right.

MR. KADDERLY: How are the "Onion Recipes" holding out?

MISS VAN DEMAN: We had to run off a new supply twice.

MR. KADDERLY: It would be all right then for me to announce them again.

MISS VAN DEMAN: Oh, yes, perfectly. If the girls in the mail room don't hear you.

MR. KADDERLY: That onion soup you know. After a bowl of that, I'm very "indulgent toward everybody's failings," my own included.

MISS VAN DEMAN: "Good cooking is a moral agent".

MR. KADDERLY: Well, friends, if any of you want fifteen good recipes for cooking onions, send a card to the Bureau of Home Economics, U. S. Department of Agriculture, Washington, D. C.

And I see that Miss Van Deman has left here on the table a very attractive bulletin on rice -- "Cooking American varieties of rice". I'm sure she'd be glad to send you this rice bulletin also, if you want a copy. Onion Recipes, and Cooking American Varieties of Rice -- Both free from the Bureau of Home Economics, in the Department of Agriculture, Washington, D. C.

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